



ESL: Helping Achieve the American Dream

The American Dream is as diverse as the individuals who people our country.

The dream may be to own a home. To look forward to a secure and comfortable retirement. To know that our children will do better than their parents.

For Qi Qin Chen, a Chinese immigrant, the dream is to build his own business. To do that, he recognized that he – and his employees – needed to learn English. So when Ann Nieto, the director of the Literacy Council of White County, approached Chen last summer about hosting literacy/English as a Second Language classes, he jumped at the chance. For the past nine months, Chen has opened his Searcy restaurant, New China Super Buffet, an hour early every Tuesday and Thursday so he and his staff could learn English.

Because of his eagerness to improve his own skills and his concern about his staff, Chen recently was named the 2006 Arkansas Student of the Year by the Lawyers for Literacy Committee of the Arkansas Bar Association.

Nieto says eight people, ranging in age from 20 to 53 and with varying levels of English skills, attend the classes at Chen's restaurant. One young woman attended the classes so she could improve her English enough to move from kitchen staff to waitress. When she completed the first level, she got her promotion.

"What a pleasure it is as teachers to have students who are so eager to learn," Nieto says.

It's also a pleasure to work with business owners who want their staff to learn. Nieto says one of the students at Chen's restaurant told her a former employer (in another state) had threatened workers with deportation if they tried to take English classes.

The class at Chen's restaurant is the first ongoing ESL program the White County literacy program has undertaken. Since that class started in August, the literacy program has opened its own facility and is working one-on-one with other ESL students in their homes.

"We just suddenly had this influx of Hispanic and Asian students and had to start teaching them," Nieto says. "We kind of learned to do by doing."

Currently, her program works with 17 ESL students and four English-speaking students, but it can't keep up with the demand for ESL tutors – it needs more volunteers who are willing to commit their time.

"The program has just been growing in leaps and bounds with our ESL students," Nieto says.

As for Chen, his classes have broadened his American Dream and expanded his circle of friends. While reading the children's book *Hand, Hand, Finger, Thumb* to second graders from the Pleasant Valley Campus of Central Arkansas Christian Schools at a literacy ceremony at the Capitol, Chen was all grins as he interacted with the students. When he finished the book, he was instantly embraced by the children.